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ABSTRACT

A study to find patterns of cohesion and rhetorical structure that distinguish good from weak English essay writing is described. The corpus consisted of ten Swedish college essays written as part of the final exam in a first-year English course. Methodological problems encountered included the delimitation of units for the analysis of cohesive ties, establishment of categories of cohesive ties, and delimitation of the size of the cohesive item itself. The results support the hypothesis that cohesive tightness, measured by the proportion of cohesive ties, is a sign of good quality writing. The good essays contained a greater proportion of hyponymy/hyperonymy and specification/generalization ties, suggesting that weaker writers have more difficulty in moving from one level of generality to another. Good essays also contained fewer instances of two types of lexical ties, identity (repetition) and ellipsis, and cohesive relations signalling the specific logic of reasoning differed in the good and weak essays. While the corpus used is too small to allow detection of specific error patterns in sentence connectors, the findings do suggest that coherence should be studied from the perspective of levels of generalization and the functional relations between units. (MSE)

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COHESION AND COHERENCE IN SHORT EXPOSITORY ESSAYS

The title refers to a larger investigation of which the following report is only a very small part. As the report is on work in progress it raises questions rather than suggests solutions, though I hope to present some approaches that may turn out useful in due course.

AIMS

The piece of research I am going to describe was inspired by frustation with the poor quality of English essays written by students on the tertiary level, the lack of comprehensive models for diagnosing their problems, and the shortcomings of present methods of remedial teaching. What we need is a model for spotting and describing difficulties students have with text structuring, and especially with cohesion and coherence. Most of these difficulties can be detected fairly quickly by intuition, but it is far more complicated to pinpoint the reasons for these intuitions, and to make them explicit. This is where the text-linguistic approach should become useful, because one of the basic tasks of text-linguistics is to define criteria of textual well-formedness above sentence level for different text types. A major problem is, however, that researchers have only recently started looking at deviant texts, as student writings frequently are. The field is largely unexplored, though some studies have been published (Enkvist 1978, Lieber 1980, Sørensen 1981) and others are under way (Björk and Wikborg, forthcoming).

The aim of the present study is to find some patterns of cohesion that distinguish good essays from weak essays. In connexion with this I also endeavour to find out how good essays differ from weak essays as regards rhetorical structure, as the force of cohesive ties seems closely bound up with the functions of the cohesive items in developing the topic.

The purpose of the investigation is, ideally, to find means of describing to students where they go wrong, and why. In other words, to sensitize them to

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devices for connecting sentences and stretches of sentences, and to what the effects of failures in connectivity are on the reader.

MATERIAL

The material of the present exploratory study consists of ten student essays ranging in length from ca 170 to 300 words. The title is Describe some of the differences between a British and a Finnish general election. The essays were written as part of the final exam in English for 1st-year students at the Swedish School of Economics in Helsinki. They were graded by a native speaker of English. In order to find as striking differences as possible, five good essays (graded 8-10 out of 10) were compared with five weak essays (graded a charitable 6-6.5).

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The first difficulty was how to delimit the units between which the cohesive ties were to be identified. Halliday and Hasan (1976) use the typographical sentence, Enkvist (1974) and Källgren (1979) use the clause, but the problem is that student sentence structure is so frequently erratic. To overcome this problem Lieber uses the concept functional unit (F-unit for short) in her analysis of student essays (Lieber 1980) and this has been adopted in the present study. F-units are clauses and clause equivalents that serve an identifiable rhetorical function (e.g. ASSERT, EXEMPLIFY, CONTRAST), to be distinguished from those that only fill essential syntactic slots (such as e.g. subject of a sentence) within a matrix clause. (Lieber 1980:58)

The next task was to find categories for the cohesive ties. Källgren's list of categories seemed the most exhaustive one, and also covers the content aspect of the essays more fully than Halliday and Hasan's system, which pays very little attention to lexical cohesion. According to Lieber, ESL students rely most heavily on lexical cohesion, so an investigation of shortcomings in this area would seem to be one fruitful approach. The structure of lexical cohesion in an essay also reflects content and the development of topic, and thus has far-reaching consequences on quality. I have adopted Källgren's categories, although with modifications that will be mentioned in context. However, as both Källgren and Lieber point out, there is often room for subjective variation in finding cohesive ties, and even in classifying them, depending on the background knowledge and the involvement of the reader. Any figures that are offered here are therefore highly tentative, and may be seen as showing tendencies rather than clearcut characteristics. It should also be kept in mind that the sample is very limited. However, it may show directions for

investigating larger corpora.

Another difficulty arose in delimiting the size of the cohesive item itself. Here there was frequently an overlap between different cohesive chains (a series of references to the same semantic field). The solution I tried was to look for the role of the cohesive item in deciding the functional role (F-role for short) of the F-unit, i.e. the rhetorical function of the F-unit in relation to a preceding or a following F-unit. The classification of F-roles is mainly based on Lieber (1980). Here is an example of the delimitation strategy:

5 The way of counting the votes also differs in the two countries.
6 In Finland there is a proportional way of counting them.
7 That is to say that the sum of votes a party has got will be given to the one in the party who got the most of the votes.
7b and the one after him gets half of the total sum and so on.

If we look atomistically at the pattern of lexical cohesion we might get a chain like the following: the votes - them-the sum of votes-the most of the votes-half the total sum, with the following cohesive ties: PRONOMINALISATION-ANTECEDENT - SPECIFICATION - COSPECIFICATION (cf. Källgren 1979:72 ff). This, however, does not reflect the development of the topic at all. Therefore I have coded each chunk of underlined words as one cohesive item, which gives the following ties: HYPONYMY - SPECIFICATION - COSPECIFICATION with additional ties between Finland and the two countries (SPECIFICATION), the restating (explanatory) relation signalled by the sentence connector That is to say between 7 and 6, and the additive relation between 7b and 7 signalled by and. (In other words, ties between the chunks - but not separate ties within the chunks - have been counted.) This strategy yields the following F-roles: 5.ASSERT 6. SPECIFY (5) 7. EXPLAIN^1 (6) b.EXPLAIN^2 (6)

In addition to the frequency of certain types of cohesive ties the cohesive pattern of an essay is affected by the distance between the cohesive items. For the sake of consistency only the tie to the nearest antecedent was taken into consideration, though this is somewhat misleading as there may be simultaneous long-distance ties.

One vexing problem in an analysis of authentic student essays is the question of relevancy. Many of the weak essays cross over into irrelevancies in their contents. The problem for the analyst is what attitude to adopt towards such irrelevant information, which in itself may be at least in parts perfectly cohesive and coherent. A break in coherence must of course be recorded, e.g. when the shift in generality is great and the cohesive tie very weak, like a weak INFERENCE. (cf Enkvist 1978:116f.) Because of the frequently fuzzy borderline

between irrelevancy and relevancy no material has been left out in the present analysis, though I shall later suggest a possible approach to excluding irrelevant material.

FINDINGS

The essays investigated seem to support the hypothesis that cohesive tightness is to be considered a sign of quality. The good essays show an average of 2.1 cohesive ties per F-unit while the weak essays show 1.7 ties per F-unit, though I would like to emphasize that the figures are to be taken as approximate.

As the differences in overall figures do not seem all that remarkable, it might be more interesting to see in which specific types of ties the two sets of essays show a more marked difference. In the category of HYPONYMY/HYPERONYMY and SPECIFICATION/GENERALIZATION, which have here been lumped together, the good essays have approximately one third of the cohesive ties (not counting those only signalled by sentence connectors) in this group (51/169), while the weak essays have only one tenth (17/162). These are interesting figures in the sense that they provide concrete proof of the view frequently brought out by teachers of composition, namely that weaker students seem to have difficulties in moving from one level of generality to another (cf. Shaughnessy 1977:240f., Lieber 1980:196).

Other types of lexical ties which showed a marked difference in averages between the two sets of essays were IDENTITY (repetition) and ELLIPSIS. The good essays used IDENTITY in about 10% of the cases (18/169) and ELLIPSIS about 6% of the cases (11/169), while the weak essays show roughly double the number in both cases: about 19% IDENTITY (31/162) and about 13% ELLIPSIS (21/162). According to Källgren (p.81) IDENTITY is the type of tie that brings the least content to a text, and ELLIPSIS is a subcategory of IDENTITY.

One of the characteristics of written expository prose such as academic text is that the logic of reasoning should be sufficiently signalled. For example, if no sentence connector is there, the reader may assume an additive or a cause-effect relation. (Cf. Källgren 1979:87) There was quite a difference in the use made of sentence connectors: the good essays signalled cohesive relations in about 45% of the cases (47/102 F-units) while the weak essays did so in about 29% of the cases (34/117 F-units). The cohesive relation most frequently signalled in both sets was the ADDITIVE relation (14/47 vs. 15/34) though in the good essays it accounts for only a third of all

relations whereas in the weak essays it accounts for almost half. Another interesting difference is the ADVERSATIVE (or CONTRASTIVE) relation which forms another third of the ties signalled by sentence connectors in the good essays (14/47) while only a fifth in the weak essays (7/34). This is especially noteworthy as the title given explicitly asks for some differences. (Cf.p.2) A striking characteristic of the weak essays was in fact the tendency to set up "false expectations" in the sense that facts were given for the one country, but not the corresponding, and in this case contrasting, facts about the other country. If more attention had been paid to the cohesive and rhetorical pattern involved, this type of error might have been avoided.

The sample is too small for any specific patterns of error to emerge in the use of sentence connectors, or cohesive devices in general. Suffice it to say that both sets show instances of errors discussed by Lieber, like misleading sentence connectors, ambiguous reference, zero-referent items, extraction, and interlingual idioms.

APPLICATION OF FINDINGS

From the considerable difference shown by the two sets of essays in the use of the cohesive ties of HYPONYMY/HYPERONYMY and SPECIFICATION/GENERALIZATION an interesting further approach suggested itself. Would it be possible, with the help of cohesive ties and F-roles, to analyse essays as regards levels of generality, and the development of the topic, in a more satisfactory manner than that suggested by Christensen (Christensen 1967)? If viable, the method could be an aid to help students see what connects one F-unit to another, what the functional role of each unit is, and at least roughly what level of generality the current unit has. It would be especially activated when problems arise, but a higher awareness of this way of looking at text might be helpful in correcting the student assumption brought up by Lieber among others:"the idea that writing a composition in a language class merely requires setting down a collection of ideas, related to some broad, inclusive topic--a metatopic--but not necessarily to each other; the only important factor is that the sentences should be as grammatically correct as possible. (----) This approach does not generally preclude the use of cohesion, particularly lexical devices, and so the disjointed nature of the essay taken as a whole is often not readily apparent. (Lieber 1980:282f.) My hypothesis is that if the cohesive analysis and functional-role analysis are complemented by an analysis of the levels of generality and the functional relations between the F-units, we should get a much clearer picture of how coherence works, or more important, how it does

not work.

In the following I shall give two brief examples of the method, one when applied to a good essay, and one when applied to a weak essay. As the method has not been fully worked out yet, I have no figures to offer. However, even at this point it is obvious that the weaker essays show a much higher frequency of the functional role ASSERT, the function of which is to "make a major assertion about the subject of a following sequence; introduce a new topic or an aspect of a topic which is not covered by a previously started generalization." (Lieber 1980:310). In other words it is a statement that is not connected, or very loosely connected, to what has gone before. At this point I follow the F-roles as defined by Lieber, though I prefer to call her category ANALYZE by the name of SPECIFY (at this point including EXEMPLIFY), as this label gives a better idea of the function of the category.

Text A DESCRIBE SOME OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A BRITISH AND A FINNISH GENERAL ELECTION

1. During this year both Britain and Finland have had general elections.
2. Although both countries are western democracies,
b. there is a surprisingly big difference between the ways general elections are held in both countries.
3. One of the most striking differences is the number of political parties.
4. In Britain there are very few parties which have any hope of ever getting a seat in Parliament.
5. This is mainly due to the fact that the political scene is dominated by two parties in Britain
6. The Conservative Party and the Labour Party together hold some 95% of all seats in Parliament.

FUNCTIONAL ROLES AND LEVELS OF GENERALITY (Highest level on the left)

1. ASSERT
2. ASSERT
   b. CONTRAST (2)
      3.SPECIFY(2b)
        4.SPECIFY(3)
          5.CAUSE(4)
            6.SPECIFY(5)

INF=inference
SC= sentence connector
SPECIF= specification or hyponym (included/subordinate item)
SYN= synonym or near-synonym

Text A is a well-organized and tightly woven essay, as can be seen from the brief excerpt above. It also shows a neat descent in levels of generalisation, without any large jumps in semantic distance. F-unit 1 is a very general statement and thus on the top level of generalization. Unit 2 shows two ties to the previous unit: SYNONYMY and INFERENCE and is on the same level, whereas 2b contains a SPECIFICATION (although the more immediate tie is a CONTRAST) and is thus placed one step lower. F-unit 3 starts a new paragraph and picks up a surprisingly big difference (which should really correctly be surprisingly big differences) in the previous unit by way of a SPECIFICATION: One of the most striking differences. Unit 3 thus moves one step lower again in the hierarchy. So, whenever the cohesive ties involve a more specific (included or subordinate) item, the F-unit is classified as one step lower (or more) in the hierarchy. The F-role may vary, however, as in 2b and 5, where sentence connectors signal the functional roles. There are other factors that affect the levels of generality, but at this point I have not studied them fully yet. Information dynamics is one important aspect to be looked into.

Text K

1. The British political life differs from Finnish in that way that only one party can form the Government.
2. In Great Britain there are only three parties (Conservative, Labour-party and Liberals).
3. These things can't help affecting the election.
4. The personality of the candidate is very important for the elections in Great Britain.
5. They elect a person to the Parliament on the base of his personality.
6. It's very important for the candidate to give a "picture of himself" before the election.
7. Press meetings are held
b. in which the candidates tell about themselves and their policies.

FUNCTIONAL ROLES AND LEVELS OF GENERALIZATION

1. ASSERT
2. ASSERT
3. ASSERT
    4. ASSERT
    5. CAUSE (4)
    6. RESULT (5)
        7. SPECIFY (6)
            b. CAUSE (7)

GEN.= generalization
ID = identity
MOD.ID.= modified identity
PRON.= pronominalisation
SYN.= synonymy

Text K is crisscrossed by cohesive ties of one kind and another, but its coherence is nevertheless not good (Cf. Enkvist 1978 on 'pseudo-coherence' and the quotation from Lieber on p. 5 in this paper). The essay starts with a fairly particular statement, and then ascends in generality, but the functional relations between the first three units are impossible to establish. 2 picks up only a part of the information-carrying element ('rheme') and does not develop it, although presumably CAUSE is weakly implied. F-unit 3 attempts a RESULT, but as long as it is unclear exactly what These things refers to, the F-role has to be coded as another ASSERT. A few loosely connected ASSERTS may be in order, if they are summed up or explained at some point, but These things is never picked up or enlarged upon in what follows.

An ASSERT is by definition quite correct as the first F-unit in a paragraph, but the trouble with 4 is the great jump in levels of generalization. I have tentatively put the steps as two, but there might be many more between election and the personality of the candidate, if they could be reconstructed. I have here only included the first 7 sentences (for reasons of space), but as the essay later on moves down another three steps in the hierarchy, this raises the question of relevancy. In short essays like these, would it not be possible to delimit the number of steps beyond which the material becomes too detailed, and thus irrelevant for the immediate task? Compare with text A, where F-unit 6 shows the lowest level reached in that essay. Text A thus has approximately 6 levels, while Text K shows at least 9, even if the abovementioned jump of two were not included. Also, F-unit 3 shows the highest level ever reached by text K, which is hardly high enough for the task in hand.

The excerpt from text K shows no use at all of sentence connectors. For pragmatic reasons we know that F-unit 5 is the CAUSE of F-unit 4, and F-unit 6 is the RESULT of 5, but no doubt the relations had been easier to see, if 5 had been linked to 6 by because preceded by a comma, and 6 linked to 5 by therefore.

When these two brief excerpts are compared, the most outstanding differences seem to owe to the sequencing of functional roles, to shifts between levels of generality, and to some extent to the use of explicit connectors. As these ideas are being further developed, it should also be possible to devise a simpler terminology for explaining to students why certain segments of text fall apart.

As I said at the beginning of my report I have not yet been able to find answers to many of the questions I have faced during my investigation. However, even formulating the problems has been instructive. I am fully aware of the

need to develop my approach and to check it for consistency. I intend to do this by going on to other types of expository essay, as the pattern of comparison/contrast is just one variety, although one that is very common in essay questions. With a larger corpus it will also be possible to find a taxonomy of errors in cohesion and coherence. I also hope to conduct an experiment where all the necessary facts and terminology are given to the students, so that the analysis can concentrate on the students' strategies in constructing the texts.

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